

## Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

# The GreenMan



## Heirloom Seeds Plant a Legacy

In a world seemingly filled with unlimited choices, gardeners are finding that many traditional varieties of vegetables and fruits have disappeared. More than 80 percent of the seed varieties sold a century ago are no longer available today. That loss of genetic and cultural resources has led to a quiet, though growing, revolution known as heirloom gardening and seed-saving.

At one time, most agricultural species were open-pollinated. Two similar or genetically-identical plants were simply pollinated by wind, insects, or animals. The resulting cross would produce a similar, desirable specimen, whose seeds could then be saved for use the following season. Each year, seed was saved and passed down to future generations.

That process has changed. For the past 50 years, seed conglomerates and multinational corporations have controlled the availability and distribution of seed. Complete control is further ensured through the breeding of hybrid species (F1 hybrids) which produce sterile seeds or do not "breed true," meaning that resultant crops are of poor quality.

Of course, some of the breeding programs are notorious for producing food without flavor or nutritional value. Consider the poor tomato. Its rich, succulent flavor was sacrificed to facilitate shipping and to extend shelf-life, leaving us with the anemic

cardboard-flavored imposter we know as a supermarket tomato.

Fortunately, since the 1970s, scores of seed-saving organizations and seed exchange networks were founded to preserve and foster the genetic plant resources of Native Americans and immigrant populations from around the world. These seed-savers are also seed suppliers, with many of them offering more than 500 unique varieties of vegetables, herbs, fruits, and grains.

Perhaps the most popular component of this grassroots movement is heirloom gardening. From larger organic farms to backyard garden

plots, heirloom gardens are planted with open-pollinated seed varieties which are at least 50 years old, although many heritage garden favorites date back to the early colonial period.

Some gardeners find the traditional or historic element of heirloom vegetables and herbs quite appealing. For others, it is initially a matter of good taste. Seed-saver Cricket Rakita at Southern Exposure Seed Exchange traces his love of heirlooms to his first bite of a ripe Brandywine tomato, noting that "the sweet juice was dripping off my elbows before I had a chance to swallow." It was the best



tasting tomato he had ever had, and the beginning of his new career as an heirloom seed-saver.

In addition to the rich flavor of familiar vegetables, heirloom gardeners migrate to the unique and unexpected flavors, colors, and textures of old-fashioned varieties, while also enjoying the history and global pedigree of many species.

Today's heirloom kitchen garden might include Tom Thumb Lettuce, grown in colonial gardens in the 1700s; Premium Late Dutch Flat Cabbage, introduced by German immigrants about 1840; Long Orange Improved Carrot, brought to North America by Dutch breeders in 1620; and a mix of centuries-old potato varieties from the Andean highlands; Howling Moon Corn and Cherokee Trail of Tears Beans; Czech Black Peppers, as ornamental as they are hot and flavorful; a tree or two sporting Sops of Wine Apples; Eva Purple Ball tomatoes from the Black Forest region of Germany; Amish Moon and Stars Watermelon, whose fruits feature large yellow moons and small stars on a dark green oblong rind; and Hollow Crown Parsnips, a variety grown in the 1800's and used to make marmalade and/or wine.

Additional garden space might well be planted with heirloom medicinal and culinary herbs, from Anise-Hyssop and Ashwagandha to Wormwood and Yucca, as well as ornamental wheat, sunflowers, and decorative old-fashioned flowers for dried floral arrangements.

Perhaps just reading through the names in the seed catalogs is incentive enough to order and grow them. In fact, a great many of the seed catalogs read a bit like folk literature,

tracing a variety from seed found in a Polish uncle's barn to a suburban New York garage. Other descriptions reflect a remarkable range of historic interaction, such as the Scarlet Runner bean, a pre-revolutionary snap bean grown by colonists who obtained seed from Native Americans. In the 1800's and before, the plant was grown for its nutty-flavored bean. Currently, it is the most popular green bean in Great Britain, although contemporary Americans grow it primarily for its brilliant ornamental value.

Seed-saving as "genetic banking" is itself another valuable aspect of growing open-pollinated varieties. Every gardener who plants these heirlooms is helping, in some small way, to keep the genetic resource viable. There are even gardeners who go one step further and cultivate specific plants with the goal of preserving the seed and sharing it through an exchange program. But even at its most basic, anyone can appreciate saving seed for use year after year. For example, you might plant Yellow Potato onions this year, a prolific and delicious modest-sized variety which can increase by three- to eight-fold each year. You could harvest quite a number of onions for cooking, share an equal amount with friends, and still have more than enough for planting the following year.

Of course, you do not need to start your heirloom garden from seed. Local garden centers offer heirloom vegetables, fruits, and ornamentals, such as old-fashioned roses. Well-known county establishments like American Plant Food Company and Behnke Nursery estimate that they now offer at least 40 to 60 varieties

for sale. You can check with other garden centers for availability. Buying seedlings might ease your first step into heirloom gardening, but there's a good chance that your next step will take you into the larger, fascinating world of heirloom seed-starting and seed-saving.

### Heirloom Seed Sources

Garden Medicinals\*  
P.O. Box 320  
Earlsville, VA 22936  
tel. 434.964.9113  
gardenmedicinals.com

Southern Exposure Seed Exchange\*  
P.O. Box 460  
Mineral, VA 23117  
southernexposure.com  
tel. 540.894.9480

(These local concerns, grow 40 percent or more of their seed themselves, ensuring good adaptation to our regional gardening conditions.)

Heirloom Tomatoes  
5423 Princess Drive  
Rosedale, MD 21237  
heirloomtomatoes.net

Native Seeds/SEARCH (nativeseeds.org)  
526 N. 4th Ave.  
Tucson, AZ 85705-8450  
tel. 520.622.5561

Seeds of Change (seedsofchange.com)  
tel. 888.762.7333

Seed Savers Exchange (seedsavers.org)  
3076 North Winn Road  
Decorah, IA 52101  
tel. 563.382.5990

Victory Seed Company (victoryseeds.com)  
P.O. Box 192  
Molalla, OR 97038  
tel. 503.829.3126



The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be

viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit [www.greenmanshow.com](http://www.greenmanshow.com).

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